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—CONTENTS—

The Eyes	Henry Hasse	4
Footprints	Robert E. Gilbert	25
Journey to Barkut (Part 2)	Murray Leinster	37
The Peaceful Martian	J. T. Oliver	55
Reward	D. J. Reiner	59
A Knight For Miss Merkins	Basil Wells	73
SONGS OF THE SPACEWAYS		36

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THE PEACEFUL MARTIAN

BY J. T. OLIVER

ZARK, the ship's pilot, set the controls on automatic and leaned back in his seat. He stifled a yawn and asked, "Are you still enjoying your trip, Karto?"

Karto looked up from the book he had been studying. "It does get monotonous," he admitted with a smile. "But when I consider the importance of this mission I don't mind a little personal inconvenience."

Zark laughed. "I see what you mean. If Planet Three is as rich in the *bosk* ore as our scientists seem to think, we'll have an unlimited supply of fuel for our space-ships. Why, the ships of Mars can explore the universe!"

"I'm not worried about the ore being there," answered Karto seriously. "I'm just afraid the inhabitants there—assuming there *are* some—won't let us have it."

"Well, we can always *take* it," Zark said lightly.

Karto frowned. "Yes, I'm afraid that's what will happen if my mission is unsuccessful, and I don't arrange some sort of trade agreements. They practically threw me out of the Council when I first suggested trying to trade for the ore."

Zark smiled slightly. "I seem to remember you had a little trouble; most of the people seem to think you would have been voted out, except for the fact that your father is our First Man."

Karto shook his head perplexedly. "I don't know what to think of our good people. We haven't had a war on Mars for six hundred years, and just as soon as we get in a position to contact another planet, they start yelling for a fight, just to get the *bosk* ore."

Zark said, "I understand how they feel about it. The scientists, especially, have good reasons for wanting to seize the ore by any method. After all, the ships were designed some hundreds of years ago; it was just an accident that a meteor loaded with *bosk* landed on Mars. It might not happen again in a million years."

Yes, it had been fortunate, thought Karto. Fortunate for the Martians, maybe, but not for the inhabitants of Planet Three. The Martians had huge stockpiles of weapons stored away in underground caverns, just waiting to be used. Karto felt sure the people of the Third Planet were rather backward, or else they would have developed space travel before now. They had plenty of *bosk* ore at their disposal, and that was all that had held the Martians back. Their other sciences were developed to a fantastic degree.

Karto would have been well satisfied had it taken all the available supply of *bosk* to power this first ship. But it hadn't. Back on Mars was enough of the ore to drive a dozen more ships—bigger ones with weapons—to Planet Three.

If Karto wasn't successful, the other ships would come. They wouldn't even try to reason with the alien race. Germ-fog would be released at once. Radio-active powder would fall on the simple, un-offending inhabitants of Planet Three. That planet would die.

Karto didn't want that to happen. Even though he knew nothing about these people he didn't want them to die. Not like that. He'd seen films of some of the old Martian wars, and he knew how terrible and wasteful war was.

It all depended on him. If he succeeded, the planet

would live and prosper with Mars. If he failed the planet would die. Literally.

A few hours later the ship hung motionless over the dark half of Planet Three. Karto and Zark stood in front of the screen, staring at the scene below. They could see a city, with artificial lights. The buildings were all of a peculiar design, but still not too different from Martian architecture.

Karto spoke. "They're even more civilized than I had expected. With such an advanced race it shouldn't be too difficult to reach an understanding."

Zark said uneasily, "That's just another good reason why we shouldn't try to do business with them. A race that far along is almost certain to have weapons, and we didn't bring any kind of protection with us."

Karto laughed. "That's silly, Zark. Civilized people have no use for weapons. They're probably just as democratic as the people of Mars."

"Well, I certainly hope you're right," muttered Zark with a worried frown. Then he added, "I'm supposed to set you down now, and take the ship back up. The council gave me last minute orders to safeguard the ship. I'll drop down again in ten days after you, so be sure you get back to the place I land you."

More distrust, thought Karto. He started to make a comment, but changed his mind. The only way he could convince them of the validity of his plan was to prove it. "Alright," he agreed. "Land near the top of that mountain over there. The atmosphere will be thinner, and no one is likely to spot us."

A few minutes later Karto stood on Earth. The first visitor from another planet! He watched Zark close the airlock and take the ship back up. He smiled as he thought of Zark's suspicions. He'd soon convince his compatriots that it was possible to have friendly relations with aliens!

The air wasn't too much different from that of Mars: just a bit heavier, and the temperature was a great deal warmer. Karto had taken a lot of training before leaving Mars in order to help him withstand the rigors of unfamiliar conditions. He knew that by slowly descending the mountain he would grow accustomed to the increased gravity and denser atmosphere.

After a bit of wandering he found a trail that led downward. He proceeded to follow it around the mountain, walking slowly and carefully in the darkness.

Suddenly he came to a clearing in the trees to one side of the path. A large group of people were gathered there, and one of them seemed to be making a speech. Torches cast a weird glow over the crowd, making their strange costumes even more bizarre. Karto was elated to see that, in spite of their peculiar dress, they were physically nearly the same as Martians..

A friendly smile on his lips, Karto stepped forward to make the First Contact...

* * * * *

The following morning a local paper carried a shocking headline:

NEGRO MURDERED ON PINE MOUNTAIN
NIGHT RIDERS STRIKE AGAIN!

* * * * *

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